



ALL ALONG THE RIVER






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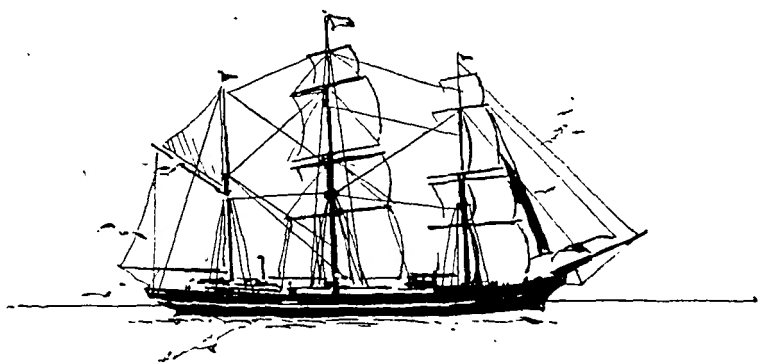
GREETINGS
TO

by
MRS. R. F. McWILLIAMS
Author of
Manitoba Milestones



1930

RUSSELL-LANG'S BOOKSHOP
WINNIPEG



RIVERS and the magic they bring into life—there is a subject to intrigue the mind. Most of us have in our minds a river down which we travel gently in times of day dreams. Perhaps it is one all our own leading to a wondrous Spanish Main, also our own. Perhaps it is the Blue Danube so rarely blue; perhaps it is the Rhine with its castles and traditions; perhaps the Volga with its songs. For us Canadians it is apt to be the Thames, which, in spite of geography lessons, we expect to find a mighty stream somewhat like the St. Lawrence, but which turns out to be much more like our own Red. It is, however, of none of the rivers of your dreams, or mine, that I would tell, but rather of that Red River which threads its winding, wandering way from near to the sources of the Father of Waters—the Mississippi—into that meeting place of mighty rivers—Lake Winnipeg.

Quite likely there are many people who have never heard of the Red River of the North. Yet it is one of two keys—and the most used one—to all that Western prairie land across which all must journey on their way to the Rockies. It is even a key to the mountains. Whether men came from Hudson Bay on the north or the St. Lawrence on the east, they passed to the west by the Red or by the Saskatchewan, and mostly by the Red. Up it, or down it, came all that passed into this country until railways superseded the rivers as systems of transportation. From that hidden time when man first inhabited these plains, its waters have responded to the flash of the paddle or the song of the oar. It is along it I would ask you to stroll with me in fancy, watching the coming of men and women to people its banks.

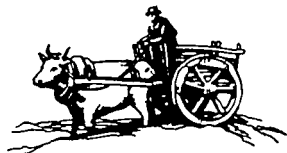


We must pass over the romance of exploring and of fur trading as well. It is in that time when people from the British Isles came to make homes on these plains that our watching must begin. From Scotland as recently as when Napoleon's power was waning, they first came. Not as today—1,400 miles in luxurious trains from the seaboard, but 750 miles in small, open boats after they had left their tiny sailing vessels in which today one would not cross the English Channel. To find what? Nothing. Not a bag of meat or flour; not a shelter—only the wilderness beside the river and the trackless plains beyond. Right well the few fur traders scattered over the West knew that the days of their trade were numbered if settlers came to these plains. Lord Selkirk might be able to persuade directors in London to allow these folk to come—the men on the spot would give no aid.



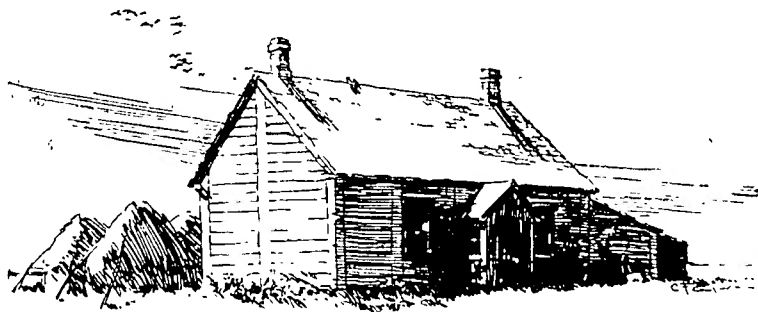
Not one of these settlers had time or was perhaps articulate enough to set down his feelings. Nor is it easy today to feel in our own hearts the dismay which must have filled theirs. Only one thing there was to do: get on with building rude shelters on the river shore close to where the Royal Alexandra Hotel stands today. Get on, too, with breaking ground even though they had only hoes and spades with which to do it. Work as fast as might be while summer lasted and, when winter approached, travel toward the South, where the Buffalo would be found, whose meat, dried and beaten into a substance called pemmican, would afford sustenance till the crop of next year might be harvested.

Up the river to the South, almost on the road along which men drive today, all—men, women and children, their meagre goods piled high on rude carts, when they had had time to make them—made that march for eight—no, nine—weary years, each year vowing never to go again, never again to endure the hardship of cold and exposure and the savage life with the Indians. Each year coming nearer and nearer to a state of savagery, and yet resisting it mightily and with success. Warfare between two companies wiped out their first shelters; drought and grasshoppers destroyed the wheat—never in that time ground into flour for bread, but always treasured for seed so that in the end they might eat the bread of plenty. The best that could be said of any summer that it was a time of “peace with hunger.” Yet no offers of a fairer home in what was then called Canada could lure them from the task to which they



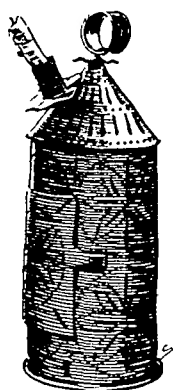
had set their hands, all unconscious of its greatness, for how could they know that they were destined to hold for Britain and her elder daughter the millions of acres to the West?

In the year in which Victoria the Good was born, they found themselves without even wheat for seed. Grasshoppers had wrought that tragedy. Even then they were not daunted. Two of their number



tramped that winter 1,000 miles to the south to a point on the Mississippi River, where it had been told there might be found seed wheat. Found it was—200 bushels of it and 100 bushels of oats and 30 bushels of peas besides—at a fabulous cost of \$6,000, which Lord Selkirk paid. Back a distance of much more than 1,000 miles six men brought it in three boats, first up the Mississippi and then down the winding Red—the first case and the last of heavy freight making this strange journey.

Almost one might say the Lord blessed that wheat. It multiplied mightily. The settlers took heart; the settlement began to flourish. But fate had still another heavy blow. Just as they, after a struggle of twelve years, seemed established, the Red River became a raging torrent several miles in width. Not a house remained standing. The settlers escaped with their lives and their cattle. You must try to picture them, if you please, back from the river not so far from the Lower or Stone Fort, holding grave counsel on the search for a new home. There came running a messenger to say that the waters had ceased to rise. The council broke up. From that day, through joys and sorrows, there was never more word of leaving Red River. The wheat, fortunately not sown before the flood, produced good crops that year and the next, and at last, in Red River, to quote an old chronicle, it was possible to “eat their bread without weight and their potatoes without measure.”



Then began for Red River Settlement, as it came to be called, forty years of history the like of which no British colony can show. All the records go to prove that to the dwellers in this remote spot these were years of happiness. Perhaps you and I would not have found them so. Almost as well might one have been marooned upon a desert isle. It was in point of fact an island colony set down in the midst of a wilderness which stretched a thousand miles and more in every direction. R. M. Ballantyne, the boys' story writer, who served in the Hudson's Bay Company, writing at a much later time than the beginning of this period, described in terms which are still real to those who know the Old World, how great that isolation was:



"Except for the settlement itself, this whole western land was as if in the whole of England and Scotland there were three hamlets, one in the north of Scotland, one in the south-east coast of England, and a third at Land's End, with altogether a population of thirty men, six or seven women, and a few children."

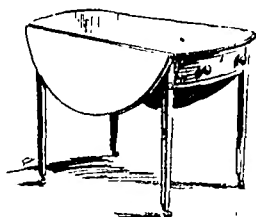
Slowly the colony grew and prospered. Not long before the flood had come, the French-Canadians settled themselves all along the river on what is now the St. Boniface side. Not long before the flood, too, there began to join the settlement the retired traders and chief factors of the Hudson's Bay Company, who found Red River, the land of promise for themselves and their families, most welcome after years of toil and adventure. A small yet steady stream of newcomers from Scotland and England found its way across the dividing waters. All that these folk—any of them—had of sustenance for mind or body came from Britain in the Company's boats arriving once a year. Once



a year came letters and papers and books and all the things which careful housewives and storekeepers had ordered eighteen months before. Weaving and spinning and bootmaking and carpentry they developed for themselves. Under all circumstances it would have been so easy to slip bit by bit into the half savage life of the native Indian. The remarkable thing is that they did not so slide. Marooned in the West, these colonists built up steadily a type of life which we today might envy—a life of hard work and simple pleasure for all—where men were neither

rich nor poor, though there was nothing like community sharing. The machinery of law and order was maintained. Gradually political institutions developed. Their churches were to them very dear; their schools worthy of many sacrifices.

As the years went on luxuries began to arrive—relative luxuries shall we call them. A piano, then another and even a third; fine bits of furniture; a carriage and pair, with a Dalmatian dog to complete the picture; silks and velvets and laces; finally, French fashions. Eagerly followed they were, too. One of those who lingered longest among us used to tell how coming in from the wilds of James Bay after a hazardous journey she was met by her sister's horified dictum, "You simply cannot go out of the house until we get you a crinoline."



For three decades of this forty years all these supplies came from Great Britain. So did the London Illustrated News; so, too, did the new novels being published then in parts by Dickens and Thackeray. Sometimes it took weary months to get a want satisfied. The wife of one of the factors conceived the idea that she would like a fancy cloak for the evening parties. So her husband added to the yearly list a cloak. An enterprising clerk in London, conceiving of no possible use for a cloak in Red River, thought it must be a clock, and acted accordingly. Imagine the lady's disappointment. The husband tried again. The clerk repeated his error. Not until the fifth year did the lady finally go to a party at the fort clad in the much-wanted cloak.

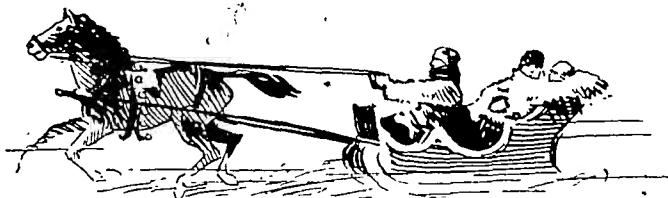


But the real point I want to make is that this settlement was British to the core, and that alone, unaided by any military support, it held the spearhead of settlement until in our own time land-hungry men and women came to fill the spaces which, to many eyes on the journey west, still seem to be empty.

It was not so simple a feat either as might seem in the late forties and fifties. The tides of population were pouring into the western states, bringing with them much that was lacking in Red River. Railways, if you please, and regular mails, and all the comforts and new-fangled things which come with easy transportation. Trade which had

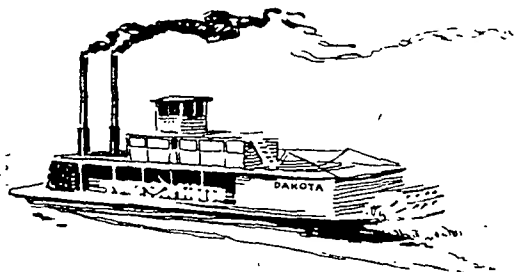


all been to the north down the river, began to go south up the river. But still Red River remained aloof, proud of its British connection and institutions and determined to guard them. In these later days there came an American journalist. His description, written not 75 years ago, sounds incredible now: "There is a spot on this continent which travellers do not visit. Deserts, almost trackless, divide it from the



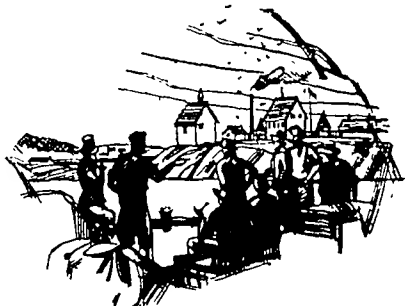
habitations of cultivated men. To reach it, or once there to escape from it, is an exploit of which one may almost boast. It is not even marked upon maps nor mentioned in the gazetteers." Yet he found there more than one good library and several good cellars. Good dining, good driving, good dancing and intellectual conversation might all be had there, he recorded, as well as in Washington, the capital of the great United States.

No one can read the records of the time without the conviction that life in Red River had a special charm. All the visitors mentioned it. Of these, J. Wesley Bond was the most lyrical, his writing inspiring Whittier's well-known poem. Listen to this entry in his journal: "I feel satisfied that though absent thousands of weary miles my thoughts will always dwell on Red River with rapturous emotion." There came while he was here the chill, dull weather of autumn. Even that could not daunt him. "What is wind or weather," he wrote, "to a man who never expects to get to Red River in his life again?"



Of course, such idyllic conditions could not stand in the way of progress. Gradually the changes came. Now the thoughts of those who lived all along the river began to turn up that river where before they had run down it. And the year that Victoria the Good became

the little Widow of Windsor marks the beginning point of that change. A steamboat appeared upon the river, quickening the transport from the south, which was usually by the Red River cart carrying its nine hundred pounds and travelling fifteen miles a day. Until that time all homes had been by the river bank. Winnipeg was not then dreamt of. A few Company people lived at the Upper Fort, where now is the Fort Garry Hotel; a few more lived in Douglas Point, close to where now is the Royal Alexandra Hotel, but the centre of population was eighteen miles down the river in the neighborhood of the Lower or Stone Fort. But in that year an enterprising man bethought him that roads were more easily travelled than rivers. So he built the first house of Winnipeg, where the trail of the North crossed the trail to the West at the modern corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street. And he built it to the jeers of the people around, who thought that only disaster could come to a man who built so far away from the river bank.



Almost imperceptibly the changes came during the last decade of our forty years; then the isolation was over. The first portent of the new time might have been seen on an afternoon in April, some sixty years ago, when those along the river saw a strange sight. It was a crude scow floating down the river. On her were eight men coming from Ontario—Canadians. Those eight men were the first ripple of the mighty tide which was to engulf the old time. They had found their way to Abercrombie on the Red River in the United States. Lacking their passage money farther, they had bought somehow second-hand lumber and made their scow. Once at Red River they broke up the

scow and sold the lumber—a true omen of the resourcefulness which newcomers to these plains have ever had to show.

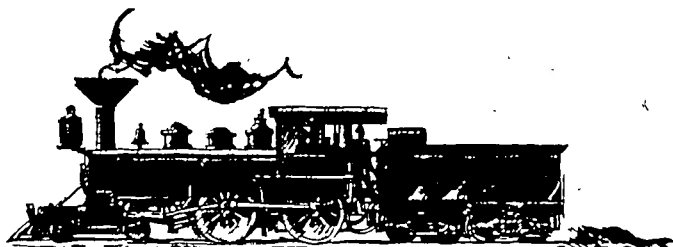


Winnipeg was the nucleus of the new settlement which, though rapid to those who watched it coming, was yet but a tiny trickle compared with what was to come. These men were land-hungry, how-

ever, and farms began to be developed. Five years later there went up the river, reaching the outside world through the United States, the first

wheat to go out of this country. Less than sixty years ago that, and it was not yesterday that we became one of the great granaries of the world.

Then were many steamers on the river and a railway coming first from the United States, as Nature intended it should come. Then expansion and a boom the fairy tales of which we still tell. The pricking of the boom inflation, and then, as Victoria was celebrating her golden jubilee, the coming of the transcontinental, built in the face of



much expert opinion that Nature had placed insuperable obstacles in the way of the union of East and West. Perhaps many of those who come west by train do understand that there was some basis for that opinion. But the early folk had done their work well. British we were, and British we must be.

All was not yet golden in the settlement, no longer so isolated, but still a western frontier. The fairy conditions brought by the boom disappeared like morning mists. A long, weary time of waiting for a better day followed. Once again it was seen that those early pioneers had done their work well. With the same courage and steadfastness, with the same faith in the future, their children and the newcomers waited for a fairer day. That day was beginning to dawn when Queen Victoria held her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. By the time another decade had gone, it was a glorious noontide flooded with a dazzling light. Faster than they could be taken care of, people were coming—coming to Winnipeg, coming to people the far western plains. That was the time when the Winnipeg of today began to be built, for the present city is almost wholly the product of the new century.

For us in Canada, London is a Mecca to which we are all drawn. The sacred shrine of London is our shrine too, and to St. Paul's we all turn our steps. In that cathedral, which is itself the tomb of its great builder, Christopher Wren, there is one spot which, perhaps because we read of it early, we all want to see. It is that tablet above

the north portal, that tablet on which is written, "If you would see his monument, look around you." Today I say to all, if you would see the monument of those early empire-builders, if you would see the monument of their courage, their steadfastness, their resourcefulness, their skill and daring, their fortitude under heavy trials, and their gentleness—then, now, and as you journey farther to the west—look around you.



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